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SUBJECT: Organic Agriculture: International Task Force Facilitating Trade

¶1. SUMMARY: The International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture (ITF), which was a successful public-private partnership, held its final meeting on October 7, 2008, having completed its five-year project to develop a method for comparing different organic standards and technical regulations (Equitool) and a set of performance requirements for organic certification (IROCB). The ITF estimates that use of these products will increase trade in organic agriculture by USD 500,000 to 8 million per year among countries that conduct trade in organic commodities. END SUMMARY.

International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture (ITF)

¶2. On October 7, 2008, the International Task Force on Harmonization and Equivalence in Organic Agriculture (ITF) held its final meeting at which it launched the two products of the ITF's five year work program: EquiTool, a tool for determining the equivalency of organic production and processing standards among various international standards, and IROCB - International Requirements for Organic Certification Bodies, a set of performance requirements for organic certification. Approximately 35 member states, private companies and non-governmental organizations attended the meeting as did the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the European Commission, many of which said they intended to use the two products.

¶3. The ITF was a cooperative effort by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) and 29 member states including: Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Japan, Kenya, Netherlands, Russia, and the United States, and twenty-five civil society and other private organizations. It was a five year project aimed to develop a method for comparing different organic standards and technical regulations, with a view to facilitating trade among countries with comparable standards and regulations; and a set of performance requirements for organic certification that gives countries confidence in each others' certification process and a clear understanding of the meaning and criteria for that certification.

¶4. To support Equitool, IROCB was developed as a baseline to recognize and approve organic certification bodies based on internationally agreed performance requirements. UNCTAD stated that these tools should be used by private and public sector

decision-makers to develop methodological frameworks for establishing equivalence and recognition among organic standards.

¶15. Equitool and IROCB are available for download through the links provided below. These materials are not copyrighted so they can be freely utilized and disseminated among nations and organic trade organizations.

Equitool- http://www.unctad.org/trade%5Fenv/itf%2Dorganic/meetings/itf8/ITF_EquiTool_finaldraft_080915d_b2.pdf

IROCB - http://www.unctad.org/trade%5Fenv/itf%2Dorganic/meetings/itf8/IROCB_0809%20.pdf

¶16. Speakers at the October 7 ITF meeting said the Western Pacific and East African regions would benefit most from a regional organic standard. Thailand plans to use Equitool and IROCB as a benchmark exercise, and an Australian private company plans to approach its government with a partnership proposal based upon these tools. The European Commission stated it would reference these tools, and possibly incorporate them into its own procedures and guidelines. According to Sophie Twarog, the UNCTAD economist who spear-headed the task force, new European Union regulations are much more trade-friendly than the previous ones because they have taken the ITF recommendations on board.

¶17. UNCTAD's Twarog also suggested that USDA should use both tools to facilitate its dealings with foreign-produced organic products. (Comment from USDA: While USDA is assessing the tools and may find them useful in some circumstances, there is no current plan to adjust US import or equivalence procedures for organic products. Note that US import procedures for organic products are already

considered among the most flexible and trade-friendly of the major importing countries. End comment.)

¶18. UNCTAD SYG Supachai said the use of Equitool and IROCB will help countries overcome the challenges of organic trade and thereby help alleviate the world food crisis. At a recent meeting of "Organic Asia," the tools were well received and representatives from the region expressed interest in developing a harmonized "Asian" organic standard, or a multi-lateral equivalency agreement based on Equitool and IROCB. On the margins of the October 7 meeting, the OECD representative praised the ITF's two tools and UNCTAD's successful work with UNEP developing an East African Organic Standard as some of the best, most practical cooperative exercises in the UN system.

Next Steps

¶19. With completion of the ITF's two five-year projects, the ITF has depleted its funds. If donors provide additional funding, the ITF said its virtual network of cooperating organizations and personnel could continue to exist, help nations utilize Equitool and IROCB, and serve as a forum for sharing experiences. The ITF opined that through international peer pressure, the creation of websites and other information dissemination platforms, Equitool and IROCB can raise awareness of organic trade and facilitate such trade. UNCTAD announced that within its existing resources to the extent possible, it would assist nations and the private sector involved in organic activities to implement Equitool and IROCB within their respective regulatory frameworks.

COMMENT

¶10. International organic trade has a multitude of standards and regulations that can create certification and trade barriers for producers and exporters wishing to sell in different markets. These barriers can reduce access to the benefits of organic agriculture for resource-poor farmers in developing countries and cause consumers to pay higher prices for a limited product supply. EquiTool and IROCB could facilitate participation by farmers in developing countries in organic agriculture and its trade.

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